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Andreae, Percy

The business man's place
in politics

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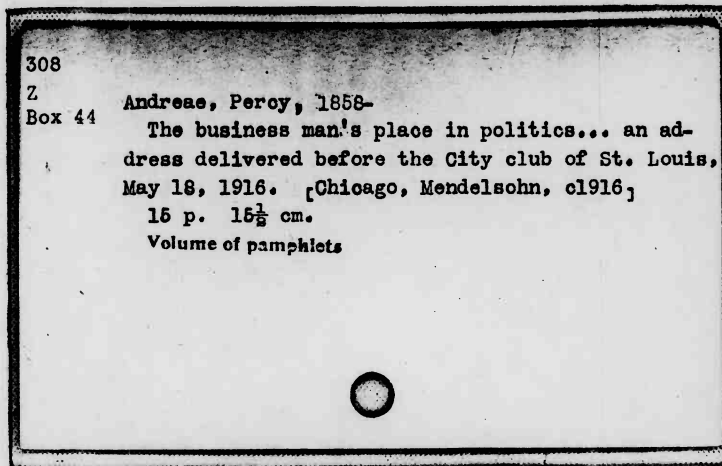
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The BUSINESS MAN'S PLACE IN POLITICS



by
Percy Andreae

An address delivered before
The City Club of St. Louis
May 18, 1916

THE BUSINESS MAN'S PLACE IN POLITICS

*An Address Delivered Before the City Club of
St. Louis, May 18, 1916.*

NOT long ago I was honored with an invitation to address an association of commercial men in one of our large manufacturing centers. The secretary's letter conveying the invitation intimated that it would be entirely agreeable if I chose my own subject, but that there was one particular topic which was strictly barred from discussion at the meetings of the Association, that topic being politics.

I confess that I felt a trifle disturbed by the injunction, until it occurred to me to sound a few of my acquaintances in the business world as to what precise meaning the term "politics" conveyed to them. I singled out the four most intelligent men I could find, and with this result: The definition of the first man was terse but specific. "Politics," he declared, "is a race for the spoils of public office." The second man said: "Politics is the ultimate haven of the unemployable." The third gave his definition in more elaborate metaphor. "Politics," he claimed, "is a game in which our votes are the cards, and our property the chips. The fellows who play the game are the politicians, and whoever manages to secure the best hand, or play it most cleverly, takes the pot." The fourth man (by the way, he was a director of a public utility corporation) had the briefest definition of all. "Politics," he said emphatically, "is hell."

It may have been my imagination, but I fancied the other three looked sympathetic. As for myself, however, I could not help protesting. "Surely," I said, "this is all wrong. Politics is a well-defined term, meaning literally 'the business of the citizen,' or, in a wider sense, 'the business of government.'"

C My four friends stared at me in mingled disgust and bewilderment. "Government a business?" one of them exclaimed. "Well, if it is, I'm sorry I'm a business man. And that reminds me"—he was consulting his watch—"that I've some real business of my own to attend to. If you will excuse me—" And he hurried away with the air of a man who has been inveigled into wantonly wasting his time in the most trivial of discussions. The others left me just as hurriedly, and with much the same air.

C But I had my cue, and I took it. I made the subject of my address in the city I have mentioned: "The Business of the Citizen." I don't know how many of the audience were interested in what I said, but I was much impressed and not a little relieved when the Secretary of the Association, as I left the platform, came up to me and expressed his grateful appreciation of the fact that I had taken his hint, and in my remarks steered entirely clear—of the topic of politics.

C Now, this story, however poor its other merits may be, has at least the one rather unusual quality of being literally true, and the truth it points is surely too obvious to need any further elucidation. It would seem almost useless, if not dangerous, to ask men what place they think they ought to occupy in an institution in which they see nothing but a race for public spoils, or a haven for the unfit, or a gamble for other people's property, or—well, let us say a locality in which the proverbial fate of the snowball has come to illustrate the smallest possible chance we know how to express in words.

C But is it not pertinent to ask, if all this be true of that institution, who is primarily to blame for the fact? Isn't it the man who neglects his business as a citizen, and leaves Tom, Dick and Harry to attend to that business for him? We are an intensely patriotic people. Yet it never seems to occur to us, who are so proud of our patriotism, and so jealous of any disregard of our country's rights and interests from the outside,

that the first and foremost duty of the true patriot is to help in the preservation of his country's rights and interests at home. We grumble exceedingly at the paternalistic trend which characterizes the conduct of our governmental business today, and decry the laws which are pouring out upon us in consequence of that trend as disastrous to the country's interests and subversive of the rights of its citizens. Yet the truth is that it is we ourselves who are enacting these very laws—by proxy. It is all very well to say that politics is this, and politics is that. But when we do so, we are merely calling ourselves names, and I cannot see that this is either dignified or profitable.

C Now, whatever you may say or think of the past or present management of our national business, I believe none of you will question the correctness of my statement, when I say that the business man of the country should occupy a place in that management. In what particular part of the national business establishment that place should be, may be open to argument. Speaking for myself, I can see only one place in that establishment where the business man properly belongs. It is in the directors' room. Nor do I mean this figuratively. I mean it literally. The fact that the man of business jogged along for many years pretty comfortably without bothering his head very much about who governed the country, and who enacted its laws, only emphasizes the truth of what I say. In those years he was busy building up the great foundation upon which this country rests: its commercial supremacy, and in a sense he may therefore be said to have best attended to the nation's affairs by strictly attending to his own. But times and conditions change, and, unless we adjust ourselves to the change, we are apt to get left. The business man today is in that position. He is still strictly attending to his own affairs, while everybody else around him has followed the trend of the times, which is to attend strictly to our neighbor's affairs. The result is, in this age of the regulation of everybody by somebody else, that everybody is regulating the business man and his affairs, except the business man himself.

Perhaps you may say that these are mere generalities, which mean nothing. But let us descend to the particulars. Take, for instance, our so-called anti-trust laws, which are bewildering so many of us today, and which were merely smiled at when they were first enacted. Their object was to protect the public from the depredations of a few men who misused their power or opportunity to obtain a greater slice of the wealth of the community than some people thought they were entitled to. A very laudable object, to be sure. But has that object been attained? If it had, would we today be admitting the non-enforceability of these laws by constantly enacting fresh and still more drastic ones, which merely aim to render them enforceable? They have caused a vast amount of inconvenience to many of us, frightening capital into fits, paralyzing our industrial enterprise, and creating panics and their resultant losses among innocent investors. But have they done any more? Isn't every corporation today regarded as a predatory trust by the sensational newswriter of our time,—that is, provided the corporation is sufficiently successful and productive to become pilloried in the sensational columns of his particular newspaper? Pray don't be startled because I dare to speak thus of that holy of holies, our great press. Remember that I am a sort of newspaper man myself, and know that the press is by all odds the greatest and most influential institution in our country, and, on occasion, correspondingly the most dangerous.

And how about the public and its artificially created attitude towards that supposed modern iniquity, the corporation, which, by the way, embodies at this day nine-tenths of the entire commercial and industrial enterprise of our country? That self-same public is itself largely a part-owner of the corporate business of the nation, yet such is the prejudice which the self-appointed protectors of the public have created against its own property that, if one of you gentlemen had the hardihood, by way of expressing your poor opinion of my humble person, to call me a corporation, I would

undertake to sue him successfully before any jury in the land, and collect from him heavy damages for defamatory libel.

Is this a healthy condition? You know, and we all know, that it is not. And to what is this condition due? To one thing, and one thing only: the failure of the business man to take his place in the politics of the country. Why, gentlemen, if our corporate interests represent nine-tenths of the commerce of the nation, you have already allowed yourselves to be stripped of nine-tenths of your civil and political rights, for a corporation, which in law is regarded as a person, with all a natural person's rights and privileges, is today prohibited by law from exercising any such rights and privileges so far as they may pertain to the politics or the government of the country. In other words, a commercial person, according to our modern laws, is politically only a person as long as he remains single, but ceases to be politically a person the moment he acts as one of an aggregation of commercial persons, so that several persons have less rights than one person, and one person is—Oh, well, of what use is it trying to explain this new system of political arithmetic, according to which multiplication becomes division, and addition means subtraction?

It is all very, very puzzling. And the end, we are told, is not yet. We have our Sherman law, our Interstate Commission law, our Federal Trade Commission law, and all the rest of them, and we are informed that others are still to come. To be sure, that persistent and interfering old constitution of ours bobs up again and again, defeating the ultimate purpose of this modern legislation, and rendering ever new restrictive efforts necessary; for, thank heaven, though badly scarred and disfigured, the old fellow is still in the ring, stubbornly refusing to draw his last breath and yield his place to his would-be successor, that intangible, elastic, judge-made modern institution of ours, known as the police power of the State. Yet how long will he last, without some assistance from those

whom he made what they are, and who owe him such a deep and lasting debt of gratitude?

C This, gentlemen, is the broader question which renders it not only a matter of individual interest, but one of grave national importance that the business man should take his place in the politics of the country. We must, of course, have laws to govern us, and laws to regulate our intercourse with each other, laws to protect the weak and restrain the strong, and laws to punish the criminal among us and, where possible, prevent the commission of crime. But laws, which, in order to accomplish these objects, tend to deprive the individual of the right and the opportunity of free individual development, and to reduce him to the status of a mere part in a gigantic machine, are contrary to the spirit and the letter of our constitution, and as such should be opposed with all the force and all the independence with which Nature has endowed us. For such laws contravene the laws of Nature herself, who made the individual human being, not *part* of a machine, but a complete machine in himself, to run in conjunction with many other similar machines, it is true, but not to be deprived of his own motive force and subjected to the controlling power of some greater machine.

C These are not mere abstract reflections by the way. They pertain strictly and in the most concrete sense to the subject I am discussing. You need only apply them to your own affairs to realize this fact.

C Imagine for a moment that our modern anti-trust laws had existed prior to the time when the American business man began building up the great commerce of this country. Will any one have the temerity to assert that this commerce would have come to represent today what it does? The basis of all commercial enterprise is the security of human property. Yet what does the security of my business property amount to, if I am denied the privilege of exercising my right as a citizen, jointly with others of like interest, to protect

and defend that property against those who *are* permitted to exercise their right as citizens, jointly with others of like mind, to confiscate or destroy it by means of so-called regulatory or restrictive legislation? The fact that I own that property jointly with others, some of whom may have come by their ownership dishonestly, or may have abused the power which that ownership gave them, is no warrant, either in reason, in justice, or in law, why *my* security in that property should be reduced or abated one jot. Yet is not this very thing happening every day? Can, for instance, anyone today invest his money, except by way of a purely speculative gamble, in the stocks of our railroads, our public utility corporations, or, in fact, any of our large industrial or commercial enterprises, knowing as he does that at any moment the earnings of these aggregations of capital, upon which the value of his investment depends, may be arbitrarily reduced or destroyed by this or that restrictive law passed to appease the jealous fury of some organization of demagogues, or to satisfy the impracticable theories of some other organization of idealists or faddists; nay, knowing as he must, if he follows our precious modern legislation, that the owners of these very aggregations of capital, representing the interests and the commercial liberties, not, as many so foolishly suppose, of just a few malefactors of great wealth, but of millions of ordinary citizens, including widows and orphans, retired workmen and professionals, are as such debarred by law from exercising their collective right to take part in or influence the election of the very men upon whom the enactment of such confiscatory legislation depends?

C We are told that the voice of the people demands that this be so. Gentlemen, what is the voice of the people today? A dozen letters written by meddlesome busybodies or half-baked political economists and published in the columns of a daily newspaper, with an occasional editorial thrown in, are regarded nowadays as representative of the voice of the people. A half score of men with powerful lungs easily pass with us for a multitude,

and if a few more join in the clamor we call them the public, whilst the millions whose voices ought to be heard, and are not heard, are gradually overcome with the humiliating conviction that they represent a feeble minority, and, with that unfortunate tendency which characterizes our age, and, I fear, our race, conclude that they had better jump into the bandwagon, and shout with their own assailants: "Hurrah! Down with ourselves!" Thus, while the public is by no means a fool, it often happens that the fool parades as the public, and the public, unless properly informed and advised, ends by believing that the fool and itself are really identical.

And what about the politician? It is the greatest mistake of our time to believe that the politician is an originator. We know from the Bible, if we don't know it from any other source, that we are all made of clay. But when the Lord selected the clay from which he modeled man, take my word for it that he used the softest and most pliable clay the earth afforded to produce the politician.

I mean no offense to the politician when I say this. It is part and parcel of his business to be the subservient instrument of those who can show him collective strength enough to command his subservency. But if only one part of the people takes the trouble to make this collective strength manifest to him, the result will be inevitable that the whim and the pleasure of that particular part of the people, however small it may be, will govern the rights of the remaining part of the people, however large it may be. The power of the individual in our modern democracy is no different from what it was, or still is, under other forms of government. That is to say, it is exactly proportionate to the faculty of the individual unit in the community of combining with other individual units of like views and interests to enforce recognition of their joint rights and privileges from the community at large.

Certain elements of our citizenship have of late developed this faculty to a remarkable degree, whilst the business man has shown neither aptitude nor inclination to do so, with the consequence that, since his rights and privileges have a multitude of assailants and few defenders, it becomes the self-interest of the politician to abridge those rights and privileges at the pleasure of those who see fit to demand such abridgment.

Pray do not assume that I am attributing any base or sinister motives to those who are today assailing those rights and privileges. Quite on the contrary, I believe these people are actuated by the best of intentions. But it is a tragic fact that the best-intentioned people have often caused the greatest damage in this world of ours. At the present day, the one and only aim of these excellent people is to eradicate at one fell swoop, and regardless of cost, every evil and every criminal element in human society, and unfortunately they are proceeding, perhaps unconsciously, along lines rather similar to those pursued by some of our more radical ancestors, who believed that the only way to make sure that all Indians were good Indians was to see to it that every Indian became a dead Indian. Thus, in order to be certain of punishing the delinquent or destroying the criminal who has hidden himself among the crowd of us, we are today permitting our legislative guns to be fired promiscuously into the entire crowd, on the principle apparently that the elimination of one delinquent or criminal is more important to the community than the lives or the liberties of all those among whom he has concealed himself.

Perhaps it may seem a highly audacious thing to say in these days of furious reform and uplift tendencies, but it is none the less true that the prevention of all the crime in the world and the correction of all the evil in the world is not worth the sacrifice of one iota of the principle of individual human liberty, as laid down in our great American constitution,—not because the elimination of crime and evil is in itself less important than the preservation of individual human liberty,

but because all that is *good* as well as all that is evil in man and his works is the product of individual human liberty, and it is impossible, therefore, by sacrificing that liberty, to destroy the one without destroying the other. And he who claims that there is more evil to be destroyed by abandoning our liberties than there is good to be preserved by retaining them,—well, he has a poorer conception of God's handiwork, man, than I have, and I hope you have.

C If the result of this indiscriminate attempt to eliminate the defective and the criminal from our midst affected the business man alone, it would be serious enough. But it affects the nation at large, which renders it far more serious. It is our modern theory that the rights of the community as a whole are not only distinct from but more important than the rights of the individual which today permeates every phase of our social and commercial existence. It was this same theory upon which the tyrants of old, who regarded themselves as the community, depended for the maintenance of their supremacy over their fellow-men, and it is today the theory upon which we lazily permit a few supermen among us, who claim to represent the community, to exercise their supremacy over the rest of us.

C We forget that it was not the initiative of the community that made the individual, but the initiative of the individual that made the community. That he could only accomplish this by his faculty for collective endeavor, makes it all the more important that he should continue to exercise that faculty, not only in the interest of the community he was instrumental in building, but in the interest of every human unit in that community whose individual initiative contributed to its up-building, and upon whose continued individual initiative its preservation must depend.

C Strangely enough, the business man, who has given the strongest possible evidence of his capacity for collective endeavor within his own commercial sphere, has failed miserably to apply

the same capacity in protecting that business sphere itself against the encroachment of those who aim to dominate or control it in his stead. And with what result? That he is today practically the only politically unorganized element in the community, and—worse still—is actually in danger of forfeiting that equality of political as well as personal rights which is the most cherished possession of the American citizen.

C This is no exaggeration. Do you realize, for instance, that the rural citizen in many of our States has secured a greater representative power in our government than the urban citizen, and that this excess power permits him to determine—under the guidance of those who are using him to dominate you—just how you shall govern your own cities and conduct your own businesses? Where is our boasted equality of rights under such conditions? Yet mark how careful the politician is to avoid trespassing on the individual rights and privileges of the farmer. Do you believe it is because he loves the farmer so much more than he does the business man? Or even because he thinks the vote of the farmer counts for more than the vote of the business man? Do not deceive yourselves. It is simply because the farmer has learned to vote and act *collectively* in defense of his individual rights and privileges, and the business man has not.

C Gentlemen, take care that, when the man of business at last wakes up to the necessity of acting collectively as a political unit in matters affecting his own interest, he does not find that his right to do so has been taken away from him while he slept. Indeed, the most significant achievement of those who are today putting forth their faculty of collective endeavor to deprive the business man of his freedom of action are the very laws they have succeeded in placing on our statute books denying to him the opportunity of exercising the same faculty in defense of that freedom of action. For, while others are today permitted to act collectively in assailing the rights of the business man,

the business man is being debarred by statute after statute from proceeding collectively to safeguard them.

CIf proof of this discrimination were required, I would only need to point to the difference between the freedom of collective action which our laws permit to the *organized* labor unions and the restraint of that freedom which those same laws impose on the *unorganized* commercial men. But, in pointing to that difference, I do not want to be understood as disapproving of the protection of the workman's right to collective action, because I do not. What I am denouncing is the denial of that same protection to the business man, and I merely cite the instance—and I could cite many others—as an illustration of the anomalous position which the failure of the commercial man to make his collective strength felt politically has caused him to occupy in the eyes of our law-making bodies.

CI am aware that it does not need me nor any one else to tell the business man that this situation is intolerable. He knows it only too well. But what does he do? He merely looks on, groaning occasionally, or clenching his fist in his pocket, where it cannot be seen and far less felt, and continues inactive, while the bonds that fetter him hand and foot are being drawn tighter and tighter, paralyzing his power of action and rendering him more and more subject to the whim and the pleasure of those who are thus binding him.

CGentlemen, a true man's fist has no business in his pocket. It should be out in the open, where all men may see it and learn to respect its power. It is with his collective fist raised aloft in full view of all men that the business man should take his place in politics. That place, I repeat, is in the directors' room of our political establishment, where his presence today is sorely needed, not only in his own specific interest, but in the interest of the nation at large. To take that place requires not only the willingness to occupy it, but the determination to qualify for it in the eyes of the public, in

whose gift it is; and bear in mind that the public bestows its gifts only on those who have the ability to command them. Its sense of our rights, indeed, is in exact proportion to our courage to assert them.

CI say this fully realizing the seriousness of the statement, and I say it, not as a mere passing remark, to be lightly noted and promptly forgotten, but as one to be pondered and acted upon. We are all of us too prone to believe that our rights and liberties were secured for all time by the mere writing on the parchment which embodies them, and that no effort on our part is needed to preserve them. I say to you that the battle for our rights and liberties did not end with the establishment of our great American constitution. That battle will last as long as men live, and, living, seek to rule and dominate their fellowmen. It takes not only courage to fight the battle for these rights, but ability to command that recognition of them on the part of the public without which the most bravely fought battle must prove a losing one.

CIt is not for me to say that the business man lacks the courage to fight the battle for his rights, but the fact is that he does not fight it. It is not for me to say that the business man lacks the ability to command the respect of the public for these rights. But the fact is that he does not command it, and I say emphatically that he will never secure his rights, nor command public respect for them, until he learns to realize that the governmental business is the most vital part of his own business, which he can only neglect at his own cost; in short, until he makes up his mind to perform the one paramount duty he owes both to the public and to himself, that is to assume his proper share of the burden of that governmental business, in the only way in which the citizen can assume it, namely by taking his place in the politics of the country.

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